

Multilingual Staff in Public Libraries

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Cultural diversity has always been an issue in public libraries. More specifically, language diversity. The United States is home to 44.8 million immigrants (Budiman, A., Mora, L., Noe- Bustamante, L., Tamir, C. 2020. August 20) Only 53.2% of the total population speak English very well. (Budiman, A., Mora, L. et al., 2020. August 20) The number of immigrants keeps rising, and the public libraries aren't meeting the population's demands. Over 49.2% of the immigrant population holds an education of high school or less. For most immigrants, the public library is their primary source of free information, yet most libraries don't have material and staff to help them in their native language. There are guidelines and committees in place to ensure that public libraries provide equal services to all. However, some public libraries suffer with purchasing diverse materials. Many public libraries lack diverse staff; therefore, making the services they provide in the library limited to the culture of staff.

According to the guidelines for multilingual materials collection and development and library services, "Libraries should provide an effective, balanced, and substantial collection for each ethnic, cultural or linguistic group in the community." (American Library Association, 1990) Additional guidelines include "Library staff working with multilingual patrons should be multilingual to provide effective service. (American Library Association, 1990) In addition, they should possess relevant cultural knowledge to ensure sensitivity to the community." However, most libraries lack diverse materials. (American Library Association, 1990)

Public libraries find it challenging to have culturally diverse material since there is so little room. However, other public libraries find that the material that is published lacks diversity. "At the Madison Public Library in Wisconsin, for example, librarian Beth McIntyre vowed to spend the entire easy- reader budget 'on books with nonwhite characters and with no animals. But it was a struggle to use up that money because 'there just wasn't enough published.' That, she

said, is a real problem." "Loida Garcia-Febo, past president of the American Library Association, states the percentage of the children's books released each year by a person of color or on a multicultural theme has remained unchanged for 20 years." (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) It is difficult for libraries to obtain a diverse collection of books and materials for the public because vendors don't sell diverse books. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) The issue with this is that vendors don't sell diverse books because the public libraries don't buy them. It is a cycle that needs to end. We are a diverse community, no matter where we go in the United States. We are a melting pot of diverse cultures.

In order for public libraries to find material that is diverse and caters to the majority of the population, the staff needs to be diverse. For example, Lupie Leyva is the manager of the Robert Louis Stevenson Branch of Boyle Heights. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) Lupie is of Mexican descent; therefore, she knows what book fairs to go to in order to get the books that represent her culture. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) Lupie goes to the Guadalajara book festival each year. She does many activities that help the patrons of the library feel welcomed. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) Lupie has a wall of fame where she puts pictures of patrons who have become U.S. Citizens. Small gestures like this allow patrons to feel represented and respected. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) Lupie also discusses that she has seen an increase in patrons wanting their children to be bilingual and will often ask for a translated version of popular books. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020)

Every patron wants to feel listened to, cared for, and welcomed when they go to a public library. The only way this is possible is if libraries hire staff from various cultures to ensure any patron that walks through the door will feel represented. According to the article titled "So many languages, so few books: Libraries struggle to reflect places they serve" by Dorany Pineda and

Maria L. La Ganga, having book clubs of various languages has helped improve patron's language skills. For example, they discuss how a patron named Juana Guerra is proud of her twin boys being involved in a Spanish book club at the Benjamin Franklin Branch Public Library because she has noticed how much their Spanish has evolved. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) This book club is run by Vanessa Vasquez, a former program and policy development specialist for the Los Angeles Unified School District. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) Vanessa speaks Spanish fluently, which has also helped the Spanish book club. Having staff be bilingual or even trilingual helps patrons of all ages. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) The Los Angeles city librarian John Szabo stated that there had been an increase in the Armenian population in Sunland- Tujunga area. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020) Therefore, they made sure to have at least one person working at the library that speaks fluent Armenian and a collection of Armenian language material. (Pineda, D., La Ganga, M. 2020)

In the Oconomowoc Public Library, the staff employed there speak German, English, and Spanish. (Bridges Library System) They have a wide variety of materials in Mandarin, Italian, Russian, and Swahili. (Bridges Library System) The head of the reference department in this public library is Hope Kramer. (Bridges Library System) She speaks fluent English and Spanish. In the article "Hablo Español: Bilingual Libraries," she discussed that she helps translate material for patrons. For example, she translates library card applications, purchases airline tickets, translates school and other essential documents. She states that people are always so thankful for her help. (Bridges Library System) Hope says that she feels like she has built relationships with the community, and the community knows that the library is a safe place to come for help. (Bridges Library System)

As a first-generation immigrant, I have had to translate various documents for my parents at such a young age. However, what about the people who don't have children that can translate. I know so many families where the children are immigrants as well and have yet to learn English; how would they go about filing important forms. The public library needs services like the libraries in Wisconsin, Boyle Heights, and Tujunga- Sunland. My parents would pay to take English classes to learn the language. If the library makes it known to the public that they offer English classes, people won't have to pay to learn a new language. They offer free English classes in my community library, which is refreshing because that is not how the library was when I was younger. Inclusivity and diversity are important in the library, which goes hand in hand with multilingualism. Patrons need to see staff similar to them working in the library. Patrons will see staff like them and know that they will speak their native language, making them feel represented and included.

Public Libraries will be a safe space for everyone to feel comfortable and represented. The biggest challenge facing the libraries when it comes to equity, diversity, and inclusion is first accepting that there is a challenge at the library. The other challenges are that sometimes libraries aren't equipped with the knowledge or resources to provide services for everyone. I think the place to start is to take a look at the demographics of the surrounding area. Then analyze what programs the patrons will benefit from. For example, there are many small business owners in my city, and there is also a low percentage of English speakers. My city library has seen this need, and they have provided various services to meet these needs. For example, the library offers English classes for free and business management/ budgeting classes for free. The city also has a high percentage of retired people, as well as immigrant people. The library provides different courses to teach seniors various activities. They offer cooking, knitting, and computer

classes. To help the population that is immigrants, the library provides classes to help get their green cards and how to fill out the forms necessary correctly.

Some effective ways to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion at the library are making programs that will include a diverse group of people. For example, in the Portland public library system, they have a program where people speak various languages, so no matter what language you speak, you can receive help and use the programs available in the library. (Portland Public Library) This is very helpful because not everyone speaks English. The Portland public library offers classes to learn Spanish, French, Japanese, Brazilian Portuguese, German, Mandarin Chinese, Greek, Italian, Russian, or English at home; all you need is your email and your library card. (Portland Public Library) Another effective way to promote diversity is to make everyone feel comfortable in the library by including a space for them. For example, in Nashville, the middle school library has a place for everyone. The librarian Erica Long, made sure there was space for everyone, no matter their background. (Metro Nashville Public Schools, 2020.) She knew that there were students who fast because of their religion, and she allows them to spend lunch in the library instead of the cafeteria. She also makes it important for students in the LGBTQ+ community to feel welcomed by making the library a judgment-free zone. (Metro Nashville Public Schools, 2020.)

The future of libraries will not be shaken because libraries have learned to evolve as the community does. Libraries evolve to fulfill the needs of the community. Having bilingual or even multilingual staff will give public libraries a whole new meaning. People are immigrating to all parts of the world, and public libraries can be found anywhere, whether they are big or small. To provide the best service possible, public librarians need to take a look at their surrounding demographics and assess what services and in what language the services need to be provided.

They need to make sure that the material provided is authentic, and the only way of making sure diverse cultures are represented appropriately is by hiring staff from those cultures.

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